

# Combating Historical Amnesia: The Memory-individual as the Living Memory in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*\*

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In Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, the first John Ames is the memory-individual whose personal memory serves as the living memory to combat the collective historical amnesia of Iowa's antislavery movement. For all his efforts, memory is framed by the present. Gilead has forgotten its abolitionist root and anti-racial discrimination tradition. The individual effort to resist collective historical amnesia fails. Through the first Ames's failure, Robinson presents the politics of memory, particularly the struggle between individual memory and collective historical amnesia. The historical amnesia of abolitionism over Gilead is Robinson's criticism of the present societal betrayal of the pursuit of racial equality as epitomized in the historical antislavery movement. Robinson's memory writing in *Gilead* is also her literary endeavor to remember the forgotten history and to reflect upon the racial issue pervading present American society.

**Keywords:** Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, Historical Amnesia, Memory-individual

## Abolitionist Movement Embodied: The Memory-individual

The first John Ames, the radical abolitionist, one of the founders of Gilead, is the embodiment of Iowa's abolitionist movement. He is very likely created upon the prototype of the historical figure, Reverend John Todd who led a group of abolitionists to establish the underground stop Tabor in Iowa during the abolitionist movement (Robinson, 2012, p. 180). Although Robinson does not make an explicit analogy between John Todd and John Ames, the first name they share, the great deeds they have done and the fact that they are both reverends all imply the connection.

As his name indicates, the first Ames strongly identifies himself with these Christian abolitionists and devotes his whole life to the cause of abolitionism. He takes his whole family from Maine to Kansas to help Free Soilers to fight for Kansas's entering into the Union as a free state. He works as a chaplain in the Union Army. He is deeply involved in Bleeding Kansas<sup>1</sup> and covers for John Brown during his escape through Gilead. He preaches enthusiastically local parishioners into the Civil War. He leaves his own family behind, goes to the front line and loses one eye in the war. He carries the living memory of history in his mind and his injured body. His

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<sup>1</sup> Bleeding Kansas was a series of violent confrontations between anti-slavery supporters and pro-slavery advocates in Kansas United States from 1854 to 1861. At the heart of the conflict is whether Kansas should join the Union as a free state or a slave state. The conflict was finally settled when the Wyandotte Constitution was passed and Kansas was admitted to the Union as a free state in January 1861. For more information, see <https://www.britannica.com/event/Bleeding-Kansas-United-States-history>.

own life is a testimony to Gilead's abolitionist root as well as the Christian abolitionist history in the Middle West.

When the majority of *Gilead* is in a state of historical amnesia, the first Ames is, in Pierre Nora's words, the "memory-individual" that embodies the living memory of the historical past. As Nora argues:

The atomization of a general memory into a private one has given the obligation to remember as a power of internal coercion. It gives everyone the necessity to remember and to protect the trappings of identity; when memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means. The less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals, as if an inner voice were to teach Corsican "You must be Corsican" and each Breton "You must be Breton." (Nora, 1992, p. 16)

This observation points out the individual obligation of remembrance particularly when the number of individuals sharing the common memory dwindles. The relative slender whole of the subjects carrying the memory imposes upon individuals a higher sense of responsibility to remember no matter whether the responsibility is aroused voluntarily or coerced by power. The result is that they are turned into memory-individuals, obliged to remember and to formulate identity from memory.

### **Combating Historical Amnesia**

Faced with the younger generation's forgetting propensity, the group of the old abolitionists in Gilead is made the memory-individuals, individuals turned into the living mediums of that piece of history. According to Jan Assmann's theory, within a community, there is a "participatory structure" in remembering collective experience (Assmann, 2011, p. 38). The group's participation in remembering the past "varies considerably: some people know more than others, and the memories of the old reach further back than those of the young" (Assmann, 2011, pp. 38-39). This makes it clear that the amount of memories of collective experience varies from person to person due to assorted factors including age. As the older generation that has the experiential memory, the first Ames lays on himself more responsibility of remembrance.

For the first Ames, what makes his very last years in Gilead extremely difficult is largely due to the death of his friends. All the regrets he ever feels, none is left over for himself. Yet "until his friends began to die off, as they did one after another in the space of about two years. Then he was terribly lonely, no doubt about it" (Robinson, 2004, p. 41). As Jann Assmann proposes that each generation, due to shared experiences, has some sort of "generational memory" which "accrues within the group, originating and disappearing with time or, to be more precise, with its carriers. Once those who embodied it have died, it gives way to a new memory" (Assmann, 2011, p. 38). With the death of the carriers, the "living memory" is in the crisis of complete eradication (Assmann, 2011, p. 113). Thus ensues the memory crisis.

With the decease of all his old friends, the co-founders of Gilead and the older generation leaving the town, the living generational memory of the abolitionist past is shrinking to the extent of extinction. The diminishing number of the people sharing the collective memory of Gilead's past and the Middle Western abolitionist movement increases the first Ames's memory anxiety and responsibility. The first Ames is made the very sole and last memory-individual carrying experiential memory of the history of the place and is tasked with defending it.

As the only abolitionist alive in Gilead, the first Ames spares no effort to evoke the memory but all are in vain. The passionate speech he makes in front of the next generation is a case in point. His excitement at the moment he receives the formal invitation plus his seriousness in preparing and delivering the speech form a striking contrast with the mortifying reception. "Those saints got old and the times changed and they just seemed like eccentrics and nuisances, and no one wanted to listen to their fearsome old sermons or hear their wild old stories" (Robinson, 2004, p. 198). In the town where he is one of the founders, he finds no allies who share with him the passion of remembering and living up to the founding principles of Gilead. In the war of memory and amnesia, his efforts are vitiated. No one joins him in defending his memory, in defending the history.

Everywhere the first Ames goes, his urge to remember the past is suppressed. The suppression finally starts to take its toll on his body and gradually he develops hallucinations of talking to Jesus about the war until eventually loses his mind completely. From then on, what he has achieved in the past and what he represents for Gilead are forgotten. Instead, what the next generation remembers about him is his eccentricity and insanity as if he is simply one of those old lunatics. The local children would tease the first Ames "as if he were just any scrawny old fellow", climbing up to him "on that right side and touching his arm, tugging his coat" (Robinson, 2004, pp. 111-112).

In a metaphorical sense, the first John Ames as an odd mad man can be perceived as what Sigmund Freud classified as a kind of "screen memories" that he elaborated in his 1899 essay "Screen Memories". A screen memory is a sort of displaced and disguised memory that retains not the truly essential and important facts but those closely associated yet seemingly insignificant details (Whitehead, 2009, p. 61). It is fair to say that a screen memory is a distorted memory, a sequel of the struggle between suppressed elements and defenses against them. The mad first John Ames is like the screen memory of Gilead's history. His impulse of clinging to the past glory is suppressed.

Commenting on the first Ames's insanity, Robinson says that she intends him to have "lived to see the beginning of Jim Crow, of things sliding away. The degree of his eccentricity reflects his disappointment as much as it does his radicalism" (qtd. in Gwinn, 2014). The madness is, in Helena Pohlandt-McCormick's words, embodiment of violence done to memory in an attempt of downplaying, diminishing and wiping out the voices and actions of those who have participated in and witnessed history, in which individual memories are "shadowed, manipulated, or silenced" (Pohlandt-McCormick, 2000, p. 31). His mental illness foreshadows the failure of individual effort of remembering in the face of collective suppression and distortion.

Yet though not well received in the public sphere, the first Ames is persistent in remembering Gilead's abolitionists root within the domestic sphere. He tells his grandson, the third Ames's about the old stories of ambush and rescue. He challenges his son, the second Ames to do some real preaching, namely to condemn racial animosity when the vicious fire is set to the Negro church (Robinson, 2004, p. 96). He repeats to the family members about his anguish at the ongoing historical amnesia, "Disappointment. I eat and drink it. I wake and sleep it" (Robinson, 2004, p. 96). To some extent, he has become the man that, as Nietzsche articulates, being crushed by the accumulated weight of the past, he "braces himself against the great and ever greater pressure of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a dark, invisible burden which he would like to disown" (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 61). And his families are the witnesses to all of that. In the end, crushed by huge disappointment at the irreversible historical amnesia, the first Ames leaves Gilead to Kansas.

### The Failure of Individual Living Memory

After walking out of Gilead, the first Ames leaves at home a package which contains two blood shirts, the script of the speech delivered on June 4th and the pistol he uses during war time. The blood shirts' original owner is John Brown, who has taken them off and put on the first Ames's clean shirt as a disguise to run away from the pursuing Confederate soldiers. Apparently, these two shirts have been secretly kept by the first Ames. They serve as the material testifier, the remaining shreds of history that has been forgotten in Gilead. It is worthwhile to speculate over the first Ames's motive. Of all things, he deliberately leaves them at home. The script of the speech that condemns the historical amnesia casting over Gilead is a footnote and written testimony for the shirts and pistol. All the "souvenirs" left behind "establish a direct material contact with the reality of a past world, the relics" (Assmann, 2011, p. 367). Leaving the "souvenir" behind is the first Ames's last strategy of resisting historical amnesia.

The package left behind is the first Ames's way of transmitting his living memory to external objects. The role external objects play as memory reminder has been noticed by Jan Assmann who observes, "Things do not have a memory of their own, but they may remind us, may trigger our memory, because they carry memories which we have invested into them" (Assmann, 2008, p. 110). By means of external symbols, memories can be "exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms" "transmitted from one generation to another" (Assmann, 2008, p. 110).

For the first Ames, the blood shirts, the pistol, and the speech script are all external objects that carry the historical memory. These objects plus their concreteness, their quality of "absolute objectivity" not only "counter denial and forgetfulness" but also veto against "the escape into abstraction" (Assmann, 2011, p. 368). As objectified historical memories, they act as the reminders of the forgotten history. And the reason he specially leaves them behind is meant to be inherited as his and his generation's legacy upon his walkout and eventual decease. He has tried, within his power, to resist historical amnesia and to preserve the forgotten history at least within the Ames family. Still, it is undeniable that the individual effort to remember fails in the face of the collective will to forget.

### Conclusion

In the first John Ames, Marilynne Robinson presents in *Gilead* the struggle between collective amnesia and individual remembrance of the antislavery movement in Midwestern America. The first Ames's madness embodies the memory distortion of abolitionism and his forced walkout symbolizes the failure of individual effort to remember in the face of collective will to forget. The historical amnesia of abolitionism over Gilead is Robinson's criticism of the present societal betrayal of the pursuit of racial equality as epitomized in the historical antislavery movement. Robinson's *Gilead* serves as a realm of literary memory of the forgotten history and a reflection upon the present racially divided American society.

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